

West Nile Virus

What is West Nile virus?

West Nile virus is a mosquito-borne infection that can cause encephalitis (swelling of the brain) or meningitis (swelling of the membranes around the brain and the spinal cord) in humans and other animals – most commonly birds and horses.

Who gets West Nile virus?

Anyone can be infected with West Nile virus, though the chance of developing symptoms is low. People over 50 years and those with a weakened immune system have an increased risk of developing a severe infection from the virus.

How is West Nile virus spread?

The West Nile virus is spread through the bites of certain species of mosquitoes. A mosquito bites an infected bird and becomes infected. Once infected, the mosquito spreads the virus to other birds, animals, or humans when it bites.

In a very small number of cases West Nile virus has been spread through blood transfusions, organ transplants, breastfeeding, and during pregnancy from mother to baby. West Nile virus is not spread through casual contact such as touching or kissing a person with the virus.

What are the symptoms of West Nile virus?

Symptoms of West Nile fever usually develop from 3 to 14 days after the infected mosquito bites a person.

Most people who are infected with the virus do not have any type of illness. About 20% of those infected will later develop West Nile fever with symptoms of fever, headache, tiredness, and body aches, occasionally with a skin rash on the trunk of the body and swollen lymph glands. West Nile fever usually lasts only a few days, though it can be up to several weeks.

The symptoms of severe infection (West Nile encephalitis or meningitis) may include headache, high fever, stiff neck, muscle weakness, loss of coordination, disorientation, tremors, paralysis, vision loss, and coma. These symptoms may last for several weeks and neurological effects may be permanent. It is estimated that less than 1% of those infected with the West Nile virus will develop severe symptoms.

What is the treatment for West Nile virus?

There is no specific treatment for West Nile virus. Patients are treated for their symptoms and supportive care is provided. In severe cases, hospitalization may be necessary.

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How can West Nile virus be prevented?

The main way to protect yourself from West Nile virus is to prevent mosquitoes from biting you.

- Apply insect repellent with DEET to exposed skin and clothing.
- When possible, wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants outdoors.
- Consider staying indoors at dawn, dusk, and in the early evening, when mosquitoes are more active.
- Install or repair door and window screens so that mosquitoes cannot get indoors.
- If possible, drain standing water at least once a week to eliminate places where mosquitoes breed.

How do I get more information on West Nile virus?

Calhoun County Public Health Department

Phone: (269) 969-6341

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Website: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/westnile/index.htm>

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This fact sheet is meant to provide general health information and is not intended to be medical advice or otherwise take the place of your doctor's orders or to diagnose your specific health problems. Check with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about your health.

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